RESEARCH PLAN PROPOSAL

Feminist Perception in Selected Short Stories by C.S. Lakshmi, Lakshmi Kannan and Githa Hariharan

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Tentative Title

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Research Problem

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India.

First wave feminism, in the West, focussed mainly on suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality. Second wave feminism broadened the debate to a wide range of issues: sexuality, family, the work place, reproductive rights, de facto inequalities, and official legal inequalities. The Second wave of feminism (post 1920s) also saw a more radical edge in feminist movement than was present in the theories of the earlier period. Radical feminists not only demanded equal rights but also asserted the superiority of women over men. The Third wavetheory(post 1950s)has incorporated elements of queer theory, anti-racism and woman-of-colour consciousness, womanism, girl power, post-colonial, post-modernism, transnationalism, eco-feminism, individualist feminism, new feminist theory, transgender politics, and a rejection of the gender binary.

In the thesis, ananalysis of the works of Indian women short story writers, viz. C.S Lakshmi, Lakshmi Kannan and Githa Hariharan and their representation of a feminist perception in their writings would be done. The similarities and differences between their writings and representation of the character of women protagonists, which makes them unique individuals, would also be studied. The phrase‘feminist perspective’would

be examined in detail for its development and manifestation. The chief questions which would thus be investigated are: what is the female experience? How is a feminist perception different from femininity? How is such a perception brought out in and through the narrative and character? How does it reflect the result of gender roles prescribed by a middle class patriarchal Indian society? How does feminist writing help to highlight the stateand sensibility of society that we live in today, especially in relation to its women?

I thus hypothesize that the feminist perception is the result of gender roles prescribed by the society, the cultural conditions and environment that the woman finds herself a part of and her location within the bounds of the family and home. The women writers reflect the feminist perception in their writings which are crucial, urgent and relevant in today's world and will leave a long lasting impression on the reader's mind. Also,their writings question the patriarchal norms of society and their significance in present times.In testing the hypothesis, a detailed study of the short stories by the three writers would be made, paying close attention to their individual narrative technique and style of writing.

Definition of Terms

Feminism: Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women.

Feminist perception: The promotion of the female gender by doing away with inequality through an examination of women's social roles and lived practice and experience. In simpler terms, it means to see things from the point-of-view of a woman.

Feminist writing: Writing concerned with the unique experience of being a woman or, alternatively, writing designed to challenge existing preconceptions of gender.

Patriarchy: A system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is the head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line.

Background

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, was initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of *Sati*. The second phase, from 1915 to the Indian independence, was when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the 'Quit India' movement and independent women's organisations began to emerge. Finally, the third phase, post-independence, has focussed on the fair treatment of women in the work force and their right to political parity.

Women, since time immemorial, have not been recognized as individuals or autonomous beings. They have had to face many obstacles

not only in the socio-cultural space but alsoin the academic circuit, all of which is symbolicof the effects of an educational culture that restricts the scope of women's intellectual exposure. Denying access to ideas is another type of infringement on the freedom of the female mind. This exclusion is a more radical kind of infringement, one that disturbs not just as a single thought or review but the life-long development of an individual or the historical development of an intellectual tradition. Describing the reaction to the feminist movement in India, Suma Chitnis writes that the most distinctive feature of the movement was that it was initiated by man and that it was only towards the end of the century that women joined the fray.

Despite the progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face several issues of discrimination. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining land-ownership rights, for example, and access to education challenging. In the past two decades, there has also emerged a disturbing trend of sex-selective abortion. To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against.In the Indian context, several feminists have realized that the subject of women's invasion in India should not be reduced to only a contradiction between men and women. The woman- in order to liberate herself and advance - needs to empower herself to confront and break away from various institutional structures and cultural practices that subject her to patriarchal domination and control.

Many Indian women writers, in fact, have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity, which is imposed on the women by a patriarchal society. Feminism in Indian fiction has thus not developed suddenly, but slowly and steadily. A growth of Indian women writers in their in-betweeness, hybridity of thought and multi- cultural, multilingual and multi-religious social dimensions, have contextualized

and brought to the fore women's problems in general and of the middle and upper class woman in particular. They drawn from the rich oral traditions of story-telling, the *vratkatha*, the various myths about and around womenrepresenting them in poor light and attempt to re-cast their women characters and their 'female' responses to life situations, all the while examining both creatively and critically how culture and tradition are responsible for the situation that most middle class Indian women find themselves in today.

The three short story writers chosen for my study have the feminist streak common in their writing, in that they describe the female experience vis-à-vis social issues and do not shy away from the expression of femininity as well. C.S. Lakshmi, for instance, links dowry to the compulsory nature of marriage itself, and to the way it alienates women from their natal families: 'if marriage is the end of life, how can it be the goal of life?' she writes. Girls are forcibly trained from girlhood for marriage and marriage alone, not permitted to dream of any other future, expecting that marriage is the beginning of their lives. Sexual uniontoo has been so constructed that it is the most feared, most terrifying and most humiliating form of assault or attack.

Lakshmi Kannan's short stories invoke and have developed, over the years, some absorbing sites of cognitions on pressing issues related to gender, sexuality, filial piety, construction of identity, cultural institutions, and the like. Most of the protagonists in the stories are in some existential crises; some of them ruminate, taking life in their stride. Quite a few of her stories are marked by distinct feminist perceptions which represent the situation of her female protagonists belonging to different social status and environment and operating from within the institution of the family.

Githa Hariharan, in her stories takes the initiative to introduce death as something natural. Unlike her predecessors, she does not elaborate on the funeral rites and ceremonies; instead, brings into focus the attitude of the dying and the reactions of the living towards the dying. In doing so, she - however - does not shock the minds of the readers for her art of story-telling is subtle and natural. The question of identity too arises in her writings as her women characterscon sider it a sin to stay alive when the woman's husband or son has died and how the woman is made to repress all her feelings for a lifetime because it is considered very unwomanly to express one's desires.

Each of these writers is thus trying to redefine feminism in the Indian context. For them, feminism is not just about 'women' but also about recognizing and interrogating how modern discourses of gender produce human beings as exclusively 'men' or 'women'. It is not about the moment of final triumph, but about the gradual transformation of the social field so decisively that the old markers shift forever.

Review of Literature

Over and above what it seeks to problematize, the thesis will also explore the idea of gender and its significance. The book *Gender* by V. Geetha, for example, focusses on gender roles and their significance in the society; how gender roles, which are prescribed by the society, contribute to developing a feminine perspective in relation to societal expectations; the role play of gender which is enforced on children, since childhood, to behave as typical of their gender, and the like. The terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are also discussed showing that these fundamental ways of dressing, eating, working, help us to make sense of our experiences,

understand and formulate our views of ourselves and others in particular ways. Categorical thinking about men and women is commonplace and a part of everyday lives. Spaces are sharply defined as masculine and feminine: the space of the home is identified with the woman and the outside world is an exclusively male sphere. V. Geetha also discusses gender as history: Friedrich Engles' well-known work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*is discussed asrepresenting how women were treated earlier and how their treatment has deteriorated with the passage of time.

The Cultural Construction of Sexuality by Pat Caplan discusses the question of identity in the modern world- especially the sexually marginal - as an absolutely fundamental concept, offering a sense of personal unity, social location, and even - at times - a political commitment. Caplan mentions that the wife must be *taught,* not only how to behave in coitus, but, above all, how and what to feel in this unique act! While the book also talks about gender issues, sexuality and women's oppression by the dominant male,Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* explains howthe sexual division of labour has nothing to do with 'sex' (biology) but with 'gender' (culture).

Patriarchy means 'the absolute rule of the father or the eldest male member over his family'. The book *Patriarchy* by V. Geetha explains how in a patriarchal society, women have had to struggle to be educated, to have property made over to them and to choose their partners in marriage. For men, these choices appear more given, less fraught and even flexible.Tradition and religion together, broadly,are seen as regulating life in several ways. The home and hearth are conceptualized as an essentially 'feminine' space; whereas the outer world of commerce, rule and war is seen as 'a man's world'. Madhu Kishwar points out that it was in the space

of the home where women's rights to equality, justice and dignity were routinely compromised. It also gives an insight into violence on women in marriage.

Sarojini Sahoo's *Sensible Sensuality* explores how and why sexuality plays a major role in our understanding of 'Eastern feminism'. Her writingsdeal candidly with female sexuality, the emotional lives of women, and the intricate fabric of human relationships, depicting extensively the interior experiences of women and how their burgeoning sexuality is seen as a threat to traditional patriarchal societies. Sahoo questions the conception of motherhood which perpetuates the stereotypical notion of femininity: "Motherhood brings some feminine sensuality which a woman can't rule out from her life. The desire for children is a feminine sensibility, and while considering all aspects, we should not overlook the emotional suffering of infertility, pregnancy loss, or still birth sorrows of a female". Feminism, according to her, does not aim to destroy the family structure or to attack the emotional bond of love and passion. The motto of feminism should be, instead,to create a new world with a new perspective on equality and a humanist attitude.

Indigenous Roots of Feminism by Jasbir Jain critiques the age-old stereotypes and is an exploration of the historical sources across India's composite culture that have shaped the female self. Beginning with the *Upanishads*, the book works with several foundational texts such as the epics and their retellings, *Manusmriti*, *Natyashastra* and the literature of the *Bhakti* Movement in order to trace the histories of feminist questionings.The constant interweaving of literary and social texts and the tracing of both continuities and disruptions across time and space enables a perception of the way in which individual struggles have merged with collective resistance and allowed a questioning of relationships,

institutionalframeworks and traditional role models. Feminism as an ideology is thus invariably linked to culture as it works with both the body and the consciousness. *Indigenous Roots*, without allowing itself to be submerged in excessive data, examines the validity of this belief across time to trace a connectivity with cultural formations. *The Encyclopaedia of Women's Studies*, on the other hand, maps for us as to how the status of women has been represented as secondary to men since the creation of the world.

Indian Feminisms includes an essay titled "To Grow or Not To Grow: That is the Question for Women"by Lakshmi Kannan in which she points out that for a woman, her works are no less a process of self-actualization than her life is. In both, she wrestles with a host of obstinate paradigms and syndromes precipitated by not just the myths, legends or the collective memory of the inherent conservative elements within a community, but equally with the ones thrown up by the movement itself. Kannan opines that a thinking writer is faced with the choice of writing in a way that would make editors/publishers either easily accept her work for anthologies of women writers or of not being included because her work does not 'fit in' within what is commonly interpreted as 'feminist'.

Considering the fact that Lakshmi and Kannan also write in Tamil and in English as translation, *Translation as a Touchstone* by Raji Narasimhan becomes an important read for it focusses on translation as a creative process. Narasimhan proposes that translation is an art of highlighting the complex relationship that arises between two languages, their cultures and sensibilities when they are positioned as a main language and a target language. The implications of this proposition are far-reaching, as Narasimhan argues in this book. The place of English in translation exercises in India is an implicit theme, where translation is an

act which consolidates the terrain between two linguo-cultures. English, as is argued, is a touchstone language, and in a multi-cultural country like India, this hold of English adds weight to the case for transliteration. With examples of Vijay Tendulkar's plays and Arundhati Roy's*The God of Small Things*, Narasimhan argues that transliteration not only can but also should extend to wholesale incorporations of Indian language interludes into English translations. Through a comparative study of original passages and phrases in literary texts along with their translated equivalents, she has followed a multi-pronged strategy and has used, as methodology, the comparative analysis method. The three writers' works could be looked at from the vantage point view afforded by a reading of Narasimhan's own works as well.

Tentative Chapter Plan

1. Feminist Perception: The Indian Background
2. Institutional Structures, Cultural Practices and Social Dimensions
3. Feminine Roles: Feminist/ Female Responses
4. The 'New (Middle/ Upper Class) Woman's' Mindscape: The Psychological/ Emotional Undertone
5. Conclusion

The first chapter will examine the feminist approach of the three writers in their writings, the influence of their common social and cultural background, if any, andtheir subjects and themes. The chapter will also include a study of the Indian background of feminist creative writing.

The second chapter will detail the cultural practices and social dimensions which are responsible for certain behavioural patterns expected of women by the society and how these institutional structures tame women so as to be careful about the expression of their desires and feelings.

The third chapter will include acombined analysis of the stories, including their unique style and narrative technique. It will also attempt to bring in the nuances of translation to analyse the gender roles prescribed by the society and how those help in developing the feminist perception of and on the women characters/ protagonists.

The fourth chapter will be devoted to the Indian woman's mindscape. i.e. the psychological aspect of her character, self and identity, in terms of her hidden emotions and innermost feelings, suppressed desires and unfulfilled wishes.

The fifth and last chapter would conclude as to howgender construction plays a major role in the development and representation of a feminist perception, both in literature and life.

Research Methodology

My research methodology would consist of close reading, interpretation and an in- depth analysis of the primary sources. I will also support my study with a significant number of critical writings which deal with the subject of feminism and feminine/ female perspectives and books on sociology, culture and tradition, and gender issues. My approach will thus be interdisciplinary. I also propose to consult various articles and interviews of the three writers to understand the connection between gender, feminism and the feminist perception. To make my interpretations more significant and relevant, I would work within the specific guidelines of feminist theories and would also critically examine the Indian feminist critique of the oral traditions (viz. folklore, myth, etc.). My primary attempt would be to study the various points of comparison between the stories of C.S. Lakshmi, Lakshmi Kannan andGitha Hariharan. My study would also focus on the representation of women down the ages and their eventful journey from compliance to interrogation. I would thus analyse the multi-layered roles of women in society and within the family unit.

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